

Ukraine – NATO: homework first

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The fifth anniversary of the Ukraine-NATO Charter on special partnership will be marked on July 9, 2002, with a special meeting of the Ukraine-NATO Commission. NATO Secretary General Lord George Robertson will take part in the meeting.

Ukraine has approached the fifth anniversary of the Charter with a declared intent to deepen its relations with NATO. On May 23 the National Security and Defense Council announced the decision to begin developing a national strategy with the utmost goal of Ukraine joining the NATO-based European collective security system. NSDC Secretary Yevhen Marchuk, who announced the decision, did not explicitly state that joining NATO should be Ukraine's strategic goal. That goal was formulated later by President Leonid Kuchma and deputy secretary of the NSDC Serhiy Pirozhkov. Within the recent weeks, Pirozhkov repeatedly stated that Ukraine viewed the process of Euro-Atlantic integration (used as a euphemism for «joining NATO») as an integral part of the general strategy of European integration of Ukraine.

An indication of the efforts to promote relations along the Ukraine-NATO line (but not vice versa) can be seen in the fact that within a few recent weeks both Minister of Foreign Affairs Anatoly Zlenko and Minister of Defense of Ukraine Volodymyr Shkidchenko visited Brussels. Several conferences, seminars and roundtables were organized in Kyiv to address possibilities to bring the Ukraine-NATO and Ukraine-EU relations to a new quality in the context of NATO enlargement and the new format of Russia-NATO relations.

Noteworthy, Russia's reaction to Ukraine's efforts to change its status in relations with NATO was unusually calm, while reaction of the West was practically non-existent – a few official greetings and not a single statement that would contain anything specific. That reaction, apparently, is linked to the general perception of Ukraine in the world.

Ukraine, in its turn, made a rather radical statement. «Further preservation of the non-block status is of no prospect for Ukraine, [and] in some cases harmful», said NSDC Secretary Yevhen Marchuk (Den, May 24, 2002). In his view, «it will be dangerous for Ukraine, to a certain extent, to stay alone, for there is a huge collective security system around us». The point is that on May 28, the NATO-Russia Council, or «the twenty» was

created at the NATO-Russia summit in Rome. The proposal to establish such a body was announced by British Prime Minister Tony Blair in December 2001. Therefore, Russia got the right not only to engage in consultations, but to take part in the decision-making process on some specific issues – primarily, the fighting against international terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, crisis management, peace-keeping, countering consequences of natural disasters, preventing technogenic catastrophes, fighting against organized crime and similar issues. Meanwhile, NATO Secretary General Lord George Robertson warned against too much optimism about «the twenty» and suggested that the whole idea of the structure might fail if the Council failed to elaborate common decisions and would transform into a discussion club. Moscow officials also argue that the future of the «twenty» will depend on what it involves and stress that Russia is still negative about NATO's eastward enlargement. Because of the disagreement with the whole enlargement idea, Russia's leader will not take part in the NATO summit in Prague in November. It is expected that the November summit will officially invite new members and announce a program of transformation of NATO from a military-political alliance into a transatlantic security mechanism. Politicians and experts in Russia argue that for Moscow relations with the United States are more important today than relations with NATO.

The US-Russian relations, indeed, have reached a new quality after September 11. The change is seen as the result of Vladimir Putin's correctly chosen policy after September 11 and his success in using all possibilities for establishing strategic relations with the West in general by proving that Russia is a major force and possesses sufficient resources to ensure its is treated as such.

The relations between Russia and the European Union have also become noticeably warmer since early 2002. Instead, Ukraine's relations with the West in general remain at a level unacceptably low for a country that has chosen integration to the European Union as its strategic goal. Hence, it may be said that the effort to boost relations between Ukraine and NATO and the EU occurs in the circumstances of Russian policy's movement towards partnership with the West and clearly indicated interest of both parties to pursue a closer relationship. Meanwhile, Russian leadership continues to claim it does not intend to seek membership either of NATO or the EU. (By the way, Zbigniew Brzezinski once told Italian «La Stampa» that he would not exclude a possibility that Russia might join NATO in the future.)

Meanwhile, Ukraine, like five years ago, tries to give a boost to its relations with NATO and attract the West's attention by emphasizing the «Euro-Atlantic vector» that has been rather successful so far. The NATO leadership has never voiced any criticism regarding Ukraine's democratic development problems during the period of mild but steady diplomatic isolation of Ukraine by the West following the Gongadze case, the «tapegate» and the refusal of the Ukrainian leadership to settle the political crisis the way such crises are settled in democratic states. NATO has never voiced any comments on that; instead, it was always stated that NATO-Ukraine cooperation was developing exceptionally well.

Although President Leonid Kuchma stressed that «while competition is an absolutely

necessary prerequisite for ensuring economic movement, in the field of inter-state political relations it is important to strongly counter any temptation of rivalry» (Interfax-Ukraine, May 28, 2002), the campaign in the Ukrainian press before the announcement of the decision of the National Security and Defense Council on May 23 and after it showed that a dominating motivation was not to lag behind Russia in the rapprochement with the West. «How could that happen that Russia will come to NATO earlier than you?» a journalist of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung was wondering.

Obviously, Ukraine does not claim Western attention (not just in NATO) equal to the attention Russia gets. After all, Kyiv has always been aware of the difference between the two countries in many respects and prospects, primarily when it comes to strategic issues of security. The «predecessor» of the NATO-Russia «twenty», the Foundation Document, signed in 1997 (that failed in 1999 under the NATO operation in the former Yugoslavia) meant much more for global security, was deeper in terms of contents and essence than the NATO-Ukraine Charter. The present-day situation, when it was NATO that offered Russia the creation of a common body for common decision-making but simultaneously refrained from anything more meaningful than the promise of deeper consultations and making no signals that could be interpreted as welcoming, may be rather painful for Kyiv.

Foreign Factors

The Russian factor has been mentioned above. Neither the Russian leadership nor experts of leading think tanks (with the exception of representatives of various political forces represented in the Russian Duma) expressed negative views regarding Ukraine's declared plans for a new relationship with NATO. Members of the Ukrainian establishment deny that the issue of Ukraine's movement towards NATO was agreed on with Russia. A high-ranking Ukrainian diplomat argued that Russia's policy had changed in a sense that now Russia is also inclined to search for constructive solutions but not on fundamental provisions. The diplomat also added that notwithstanding the fact that NATO's door remains open for any country that belongs to the North-Atlantic region and meets the necessary criteria, nowadays only «one and a half» among the NATO members fully support Ukraine's intentions. By the way, speaking about the open door: a leading advisor to NATO leadership confirmed that the door exists, but that is a door of a railway car, and the train moving.

Representatives of the leadership of the Alliance confirm that there is no consensus on the Ukraine issue. Indirectly, in unofficial talks, they suggest that, first, Ukraine does not enjoy the sufficient level of trust as to its ability to pursue a consistent policy that will not be influenced by a possible change of the government and the president. It is also hinted that the West does not trust President Leonid Kuchma and his inner circle that currently have all (official as well as shadow) power in Ukraine. The doubts shared by Western institutions – NATO as well as the EU, and individual member states of the two alliances, and the United States – are about the quality of democratic development, the building of the state governed by the rule of law, economic transition, and the military reform. Meanwhile, nobody denies that Ukraine has the right to apply officially for NATO

membership once it meets the required criteria.

Noteworthy, senior NATO officials suggest that – should Ukraine's application for membership be submitted and considered – the issue of the Black Sea Fleet on the Ukrainian territory will be only of secondary importance, if at all. According to an adviser to the NATO Secretary General, nowadays Brussels does not discuss that issue at all. According to Director of the Institute for National Strategic Studies of the National Defense University Stephen Flanagan, the issue of the Black Sea Fleet depend on what sort of relations will be between NATO and the West and Russia at that time.

It is impossible today to guess what NATO's reaction will be to a document that is being prepared by the Ukrainian leadership as a sort of «attachment» to the Ukraine-NATO Charter. The document was mentioned, among other things, by Deputy Secretary of the NSDC of Ukraine Serhiy Pirozhkov at a recent international conference on Ukraine and regional security cooperation, organized by NATO and the Center for European and International Studies at the Institute of International Relations of the Kyiv National University. Though, unofficial comments to that end make it possible to assume that the reaction to the document will be rather skeptical. Meanwhile, it is possible that the document will argue for a possibility for Ukraine to take part in the framework of the Membership Action Plan, approved at the 1999 Washington summit – which itself cannot guarantee that the invitation to join the Alliance will be made.

So far there has been no visible reaction to Ukraine's suggestion that the West should stop speaking about it as a «unique partner» and begin treating it just like any other European state. Speaking to representatives of Ukrainian think tanks and the media some time ago, chairman of the American NATO Committee Bruce Jackson said that Ukraine is also a part of Europe, in the view of members of his influential association, and there is a place for Ukraine in the European security system. In his opinion, the southern dimension will be of major importance, and, possibly, it would be effective to link NATO's policy towards Ukraine with Turkey and Greece. Turkey, in his opinion, is important because of the new major challenges to European security: the Caucasus, Iran, the situation in Israel and the Balkans, and, it is possible that similar close relations might be maintained with Ukraine for the same reason (Den, May 29, 2002). The importance of Ukraine for NATO is in its military potential, and from the perspective of geography, according to Stephen Flanagan (Den, June 11, 2002).

As the relations between Russia and the West, primarily Russia and the USA, Ukraine has lost the chance to capitalize only on its geopolitical situation. Because of the extremely unsuitable domestic policy of the recent years Ukraine's role has been reduced to that of a second-rate player that does not attract much attention in the context of changes in the global security system – be it organization of secure transportation routes for energy sources supplied to Western Europe or alike. Notwithstanding Germany's successful experience of using Ukrainian cargo aircraft for transporting cargo to Afghanistan during the anti-terrorist operation, countries of Western Europe rejected services of Ukrainian cargo air carriers and do not consider a possibility of including Ukraine in creation of the European rapid reaction forces. That suggests that today

Ukraine is not seen as a potential «member of the club» or an equal partner. Moreover, NATO officials keep hinting that once the deep transformation of the Alliance is under way, NATO may simply have no time for Ukraine. The NSDC's statement of May 23 has been seen so far by the Alliance and by analysts of the member states as an entirely Ukrainian business.

Domestic Factors

There are a number of domestic factors, which – as admitted not just by the West but also by Ukrainian state officials – hinder successful relations between Ukraine and the USA and Ukraine and the European Union. Those factors do not allow a present-day Ukraine to hope that its possible application for NATO membership will be unilaterally supported by the members of the Alliance. The «mature democracies» do not trust the current leadership of Ukraine due to the latter's failure to abide by its promises and fulfill its obligations – namely, democratization, reducing state interference with various spheres of the society, and the lack of a clear and understandable foreign policy, to name but the few.

NATO asks its potential candidates to comply with another specific requirement: a candidate country should have completed an effective reform of the armed forces. Reforming the Armed Forces of Ukraine alone requires efforts and expenditures that until recently have seemed incredible. According to NATO standards, defense spending of a candidate state should comprise 2.5 percent of the country's GDP. For a NATO member state the figure is 3 percent of the GDP. To date Ukraine's armed forces have been «content» with 1.25 percent of the GDP. Experts believe that Ukraine will reach the figure of 2.5 percent for its defense budget no earlier than in 5 or 6 years. It should also be mentioned that Ukraine has Europe's second largest armed forces, and Europe's first in terms of quantity of heavy armaments that are far from NATO standards. Moreover, Ukraine still has to deal with the needs of 80 thousand houseless officers. Currently NATO finances officer retraining programs to assist their adaptation to the civilian labor market, but that support is obviously insufficient when a massive national program is missing. The problem is likely to deteriorate if Ukraine pursues radical reduction of the number of troops in active duty, which is required by the transfer to an effective professional army. Another necessary condition is the transfer to civilian control over the Armed Forces – something for which Ukrainian military establishment is not prepared yet.

Representatives of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine admit that before the NSDC decision to move towards joining NATO was announced on May 23, the military had not received any tasks from the political leadership of the state regarding the direction of the military reform and transition to the standards common for NATO member states' armed forces. Nowadays, only the units that have performed peacekeeping operations under the NATO command are compatible with the NATO standards.

One of the most important factors in the process of Ukraine's approximation to NATO is

the people's trust in their officials, the president, the parliament, and the government. The levels of that trust today are very low – which is unlikely to inspire leaders of Western states to support Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

The consensus of political forces, found in Ukraine's neighbor states of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Baltics in their movement towards NATO, still may be achieved in Ukraine. For instance, none of the six major political forces represented in the parliament declared in its election programs that Ukraine should be joining NATO. The Communist party of Ukraine has gradually changed its radically negative view on NATO – probably, influenced by the recent transformation of the Russia-NATO relations. Moreover, after Belgrade applied for participation of Serbia and Montenegro in the Partnership for Peace it became very difficult to accuse NATO referring to the Yugoslav campaign. Advocates of the idea «To Europe with Russia» have not made their view on the situation clear, either.

Another factor that for a while will play a negative role for the implementation of Ukraine's hopes is the low level of support in the Ukrainian society for the idea of integration with NATO. The most optimistic of the public opinion survey results suggest that no more than 30 percent of the population is supportive of the idea of Ukraine's application for NATO membership. Though, two years ago the proportion was lower. One of the reasons for that attitude is the perception of the world by Ukrainians almost exclusively depends on Russia's information policy, when a professional information policy and coverage of international events in Ukraine is insufficient, when even national media lack professionalism. Hence, the public is uninformed about the price that Ukraine will pay for joining (or not joining) NATO, about possible costs and benefits, about prospects for, and challenges of joining the Euro-Atlantic community that after the Prague summit will number at least 24 member states.

Hence, the chance that Ukraine has received – a potentially unique chance to come closer to the West, primarily as a contributor to European security – may be wasted. For even having done the massive «homework» Ukraine is not guaranteed a level of trust among the potential Western partners needed for the beginning of the NATO accession process. Meanwhile, a new quality of relations with NATO could be used as the first step towards closer integration into the European space.